

# KNOW INDIA THEATRE



*Front Cover: Utar Baokar doing make-up*  
*Back Cover: The two human puppets in Girish*  
*Karnad's "Hayavadan" directed by*  
*Amal Allana, Punjab University,*  
*Chandigarh (1973)*

THEATRE





*Utra Baokar fixing her earring  
in the classical Sanskrit farce  
"Mattavilasa" (Drunken Revelry),  
National Repertory Theatre,  
New Delhi (1985)*



## THEATRE

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Classical Indian theatre flourished during the first nine centuries of the Christian era. Aphorisms on acting appear in the writings of Panini, the Sanskrit grammarian of the 5th century BC, and references to actors, dancers, mimers, theatrical companies, and academies are found in Kautilya's book on statesmanship, the *Arthashastra* (4th century BC).

The chief source of classical Indian theatre is Bharata Muni's *Natya-sastra* (1st century BC to 1st century AD), a comprehensive treatise on the origin and function of *natya* (dramatic art that is also dance), on types of plays, gesture language, acting, miming, theatre architecture, production, makeup, costumes, masks, and various *bhavas* ("emotions") and *rasas* ("sentiments").

Bharata classified drama into ten types. The two most important are *nataka* ("heroic"), which deals with the exalted themes of gods and kings and draws from history or mythology (Kalidasa's *Shakuntala* and Bhavabhuti's *Uttararamacharita* fall into this category), and *prakarana* ("social"), in which the dramatist invents a plot dealing with ordinary human beings, such as a courtesan or a woman of low morals (Sudraka's *Mrcchakatika*, "The Little Clay Cart," belongs to this type).

Plays range from one to ten acts. There are many types of one-act plays, including *bhana* ("monologue"), in which a single character carries on a dialogue with an invisible one, and *prahasana* ("farce"), which is classified into two categories: superior and inferior, both dealing with courtesans and crooks. *Bhagavad-Ajjukiya* ("The Monk and the Harlot") and *Mattavilasa* ("Drunken Revelry") are examples of *prahasana*.

The ancient Hindus insisted on a small playhouse, because dramas were acted in a highly stylized gesture language with subtle movements of eyes and hands. Hindu theatre differed from its Greek counterpart in temperament and method of production. The three unities rigidly followed by the Greeks were totally unknown to Sanskrit dramatists. Less time was consumed by a Greek program of three tragedies and a farce than by single Sanskrit drama, with its subsidiary plots and wide variety of characters and moods. The Greeks laid emphasis on plot and speech, the Hindus on the four types of acting and visual demonstration. People were audiences to the Greeks and spectators to the Hindus. The aesthetic rules also

differed. The Greek conception of tragedy is totally absent in Sanskrit dramas, as is the aesthetic principle that prohibits any death or defeat of the hero on stage.

There were two types of Hindu productions: the *lokadharmi*, or realistic theatre, with natural presentation of human behaviour and properties catering to the popular taste, and the *natyadharmi*, or stylized drama, which, using gesture language and symbols, was considered more artistic. In *Shakuntala* the king enters riding an imaginary chariot, and *Shakuntala* plucks flowers that are not there; in "The Little Clay Cart" the thief breaks through a nonexistent wall, and Maitreya passes through Vasantasena's seven courtyards by miming.

The most acclaimed dramatist is Kalidasa. *Shakuntala* represents not only Kalidasa at his best but also the full flowering of Sanskrit drama. The dramatic situations are built up systematically, the characters are sharply drawn, and the form has a symphonic beauty. Other important playwrights succeeding him include Harsa, Mahendravarman, Bhavabhuti, and Visakhadatta. An exception is King Sudraka, whose work is perhaps the most theatrical in the entire Sanskrit range. His ten-act play, "The Little Clay Cart" has a wide range of characters: a beautiful courtesan in love with a poor merchant, a noble thief, a corrupt judge, gamblers, cart drivers, executioners, courtiers, a blundering foolish brahmin and a lustful brother-in-law of the king.

"The Little Clay Cart" has been successful in the West, whereas Indian audiences, still fed on poetic-flavoured characters and romances of an ethereal type, have favored *Shakuntala*. Western audiences find "The Little Clay Cart" more in their own tradition of realism and individualized characterization. Its "lispering villain," gamblers, and rogues have something in common with Shakespeare's comic characters and Moliere's crooks. "The Little Clay Cart" is better theatre, whereas *Shakuntala* is better poetry.

After the decline of Sanskrit drama, folk theatre developed in various regional languages from the 14th through the 19th centuries. Some conventions and stock characters of classical drama (stage preliminaries, the opening prayer song, the *sutradhara*, and the *vidusaka*) were adopted into folk theatre, which lavishly employs music, dance, drumming, exaggerated makeup, masks, and a singing chorus. Thematically it deals with mythological heroes, medieval romances, and social and political events, and it is a rich store of customs, beliefs, legends and rituals. It is a "total theatre," invading all the senses of the spectators.



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The most crystalized forms are the *jatra* of Bengal, the *nautanki*, *ramlila*, and *raslila* of North India, the *bhavai* of Gujarat, the *tamasha* of Maharashtra, the *terukkuttu* of Tamil Nadu, and the *yaksagana* of Karnataka.

Folk theatre is performed in the open on a variety of arena stages; round, square, rectangular, multiple-set. The *bhavai*, enacted on a ground-level circle, and the *jatra*, on a 16-foot (five-metre) square platform, have gangways that run through the surrounding audience and connect the stage to the dressing room. Actors enter and exit through these gangways, which serve a function similar to the *hanamichi* of the Japanese Kabuki theatre. In the *ramlila*, the action sometimes occurs simultaneously at various levels on a multiple set. Actors in *nautanki* and *bhavai* sit on the stage in full view instead of exiting and sing and play an instrument as a part of the chorus. In the *ramlila*, the actor playing Ravana removes his ten-headed mask when he is not acting and continues sitting on his throne, but for the spectators he is theatrically absent. Asides, soliloquies, and monologues abound. Scenes melt into one another, and the action continues in spite of change of locale.

In most folk forms the art of the actor is hereditary. He learns by watching his elders throughout childhood. He starts with drumming, then dancing, plays female roles, and then major roles.

All roles are played by men except in the *tamasha* and in the *jatra*.

In the *ramlila* and *raslila*, the principle characters—Rama and Krisna—are always played by boys under 14, because tradition decreed that they must be pure and innocent. They are considered representatives of the gods and are worshipped on these occasions. In the *ramlila* the *vyas* ("director"), present on the stage throughout the performance, prompts and directs the characters loudly enough for the audience to hear. This is not regarded as disturbing because it is an accepted part of the tradition. Adult roles such as Ravana and Hanuman are sometimes played by the same individual throughout his life.

Urdu and Hindi drama began with the production of *Indrasabha* by Nawab Wajid Ali Shah in 1855 and was developed by the Parsi Theatrical companies until the 1930s.

Parsi theatre was an amalgam of European techniques and local classical forms, folk dramas, farces, and pageants. Mythical titans thundered on the stage. Devils soared in the air, daggers flew, thrones moved, and heroes jumped from high palace walls. Vampire

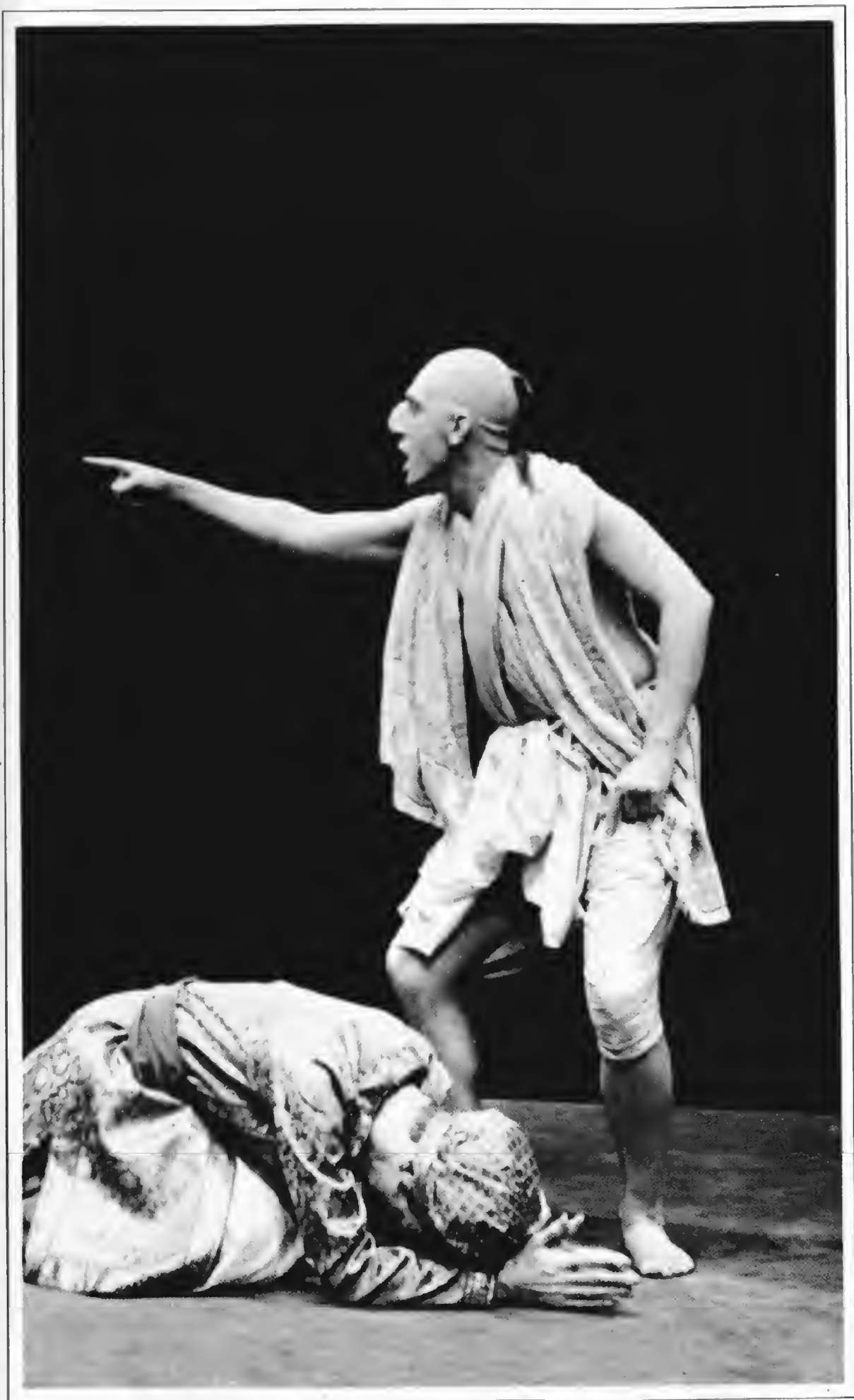
pits, the painted back cloth of a generalized scene, and mechanical devices to operate flying figures were direct copies of the 19th century Lyceum melodramas and Drury Lane spectacles in London.

Among the actors who modeled regional-language theatres are Shri Narayan Rao Rajhans (popularly known as the Bala Gandharva of the Maharashtra stage), Jayashankar Bhojak Sundari of Gujarat, and Sthanam Narasimhrao of Andhra. All three specialized in female roles and were star attractions during the first quarter of the 20th century.

In northern and western India, theatre developed in the latter half of the 19th century. The Bombay Parsi companies, using Hindi and Urdu, toured all over India. Their spectacular showmanship, based on a dramatic structure of five acts with songs, dances, comic scenes, and declamatory acting, was copied by regional theatres. The Maharashtrian theatre, founded in 1843 by Visnudas Bhave, a singer-composer-wood-carver in the court of the Raja of Sangli, was developed by powerful dramatists such as Khadilkar, and Gadkari, who emphasized Maratha nationalism. The acting style in Maharashtrian theatre remained melodramatic, passionately arousing audiences to laughter or tears.

In the south, the popularity of dance-dramas has not allowed theatrical realism to flourish. Tamil commercial companies with their song and dance extravaganzas have dominated Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, and Karnataka. The most outstanding Tamil company since the independence of India in 1947 has been the T.K.S. Brothers of Madras, famous for trick scenes and gorgeous settings. Also famous is the actor-producer-proprietor Rajamanickam, who specializes in mythological plays with an all-male cast, using horses, chariots, processions, replicas of temples, and even elephants.

The first elements of realism were introduced in the 1920s by Sisir Kumar Bhaduri, Naresh Mitra, Ahindra Chowdhuri, and Durga Das Banerji, together with the actresses Probha Devi and Kanka Vati. Sisir performed two most memorable roles: the aging Mughal emperor Aurangzeb and the shrewd Hindu philosopher-politician Canakya. Sisir's style has been refined by actor-director Sombhu Mitra and his actress wife Tripti, who worked in the Left-wing People's Theatre movement in the 1940s. With other actors they founded the Bahurupée group in 1949 and produced many Tagore plays including *Rakta Karabi* ("Red Oleanders") and *Bisarjan* ("Sacrifice"), so far unattempted by any professional company.





*Detail from "The Little Clay Cart" (p. 9)*

*The blundering Brahmin, Maitreya, scolding  
the King's Brother-in-law Sanasthanaka  
in "The Little Clay Cart", University Theatre,  
Minnesota (1966)*



*Court scene where Shakuntala is pleading with King Dushyanta who rejects her in a song and dance play "Shakuntala", directed by Narendra Sharma; produced by Begum Qudsia Zaidi, New Delhi (1959)*

*Half made-up Jatra actor (Bengal's folk theatre)  
using exaggerated and bold lines. Calcutta  
(1964)*



*Half made-up Rama and Sita in the annual  
31-day cycle play "Ramlila" in Ramnagar,  
Varanasi, produced by Maharaja of Banaras  
(1964)*









◀ Krishna playing on the flute in a modern ballet  
"Krishnalila", New Delhi (1960)

*Krishna playing flute and dancing in a  
miniature painting*



*Struggle for son between Governor's Wife and  
Kitchen Maid in the Marathi version of  
Brecht's "The Caucasian Chalk Circle" in the  
Tamasha folk style, directed by Vijaya Mehta,  
Bombay (1980) pp. 16-17*











*Prithvi Raj Kapur as the elder brother in  
"Deewar" (The Dividing Wall), Prithvi Theatre,  
Bombay (1945) p. 18*

*Rabindranath Tagore in his opera "Valmiki  
Pratibha" (1881) p. 19*

*The four chorus in T.S. Eliot's "Murder in the  
Cathedral", directed by E. Alkazi, Bombay  
(1957)*

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), steeped in Hindu classics and indigenous folk forms but responsive to European techniques of production, evolved a dramatic form quite different from those of his contemporaries. He directed and acted in his plays along with his cousins, nephews, and students. These productions were staged mostly at his school, Santiniketan, in Bengal as a non-professional and experimental theatre. The Calcutta elite and foreign visitors were attracted to these performances. Tagore created the novel opera-dance form in which a chorus sat on the stage and sang while the players acted out their roles in dance and stylized movements. Sometimes Tagore himself sat on a stool acting as the *sutradhara* and chanted to the accompaniment of music and drum as the dancing players became visual moving pictures.

The star film actor Prithvi Raj Kapoor founded Prithvi Theatres in Bombay in 1944 and brought robust realism to Hindi drama, especially in his play *DEEVAR* ("The Dividing Wall"), then closed down in 1960 with a sense of completion after many tours throughout India. Prithvi's sons, nephews, and old associates worked in his large company, which became a training centre for many actors who later joined the films. Among these was the outstanding stage actress Zohra Sehgal, a former dance-partner of Uday Shankar in the 1930s. Out of Prithvi's eight productions, in which he always played the lead, the best was *Pathan* (1946), which ran for 558 nights. It deals with the friendship between a tribal Muslim khan and a Hindu dewan and is set in the rugged frontier from which Prithvi came. This tragedy of two archtypes in which the khan sacrifices his son to save the life of his friend's son had intensity of action, smoldering passion, and unity of mood and achieved the highest quality of realism on the Hindi stage to this day.

The modern Hindi theatre was born in 1962 with Ebrahim Alkazi's production of Mohan Rakesh's *Aasadh ka ed Din* ("One Day in the Month of July"). The play describes the conflict of the great Sanskrit poet Kalidasa between his career in the royal court and his beloved in the village. Alkazi's lyrical and sensitive handling of the characters and his design had a refreshing and unusual appeal.

Alkazi produced and directed the largest number of plays in diverse styles with stunning theatricality. They include: *Oedipus*, *Othello*, *The Miser*, *Murder in The Cathedral*, *Yerma*, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, Anouilh's *Antigone*, *Waiting for Godot*, *The House of Bernarda Alba*, a new experience for his actors and disciples. As director of the National School of Drama of New Delhi, during his 15 years teaching and directing, he produced regional language plays, and put them on an all-India map.



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His production Dharam Vir Bharati's *Andhayug* in the ruins of Ferozeshah Kotla at Delhi was a new experience for the audience. The play relates to the feud between the Kauravas and the Pandavas, presided over by the blind King Dhritarashtra, who sees the sure destruction of his sons and nephews but cannot stop it.

His production of *Tughlaq* written by the Kannad writer Girish Karnad deals with the life of a 14th century eccentric sultan, his brutality, wisdom, intrigues, loneliness and the political failure of this visionary. Manohar Singh, chief of the National Repertory Company in New Delhi, played the role with demonic power and is still identified with the character he has been playing on and off for the last 12 years.

Alkazi's production of *Sultan Razia* by Balwant Gargi, portrayed a 13th century Slave Dynasty Queen and her passion for her Abyssinian slave. The male-oriented society of her times and court intrigues finally destroyed her. Rohini Hattangadi ("Gandhi film's Kasturba") played the tragic Queen.

Among contemporary playwrights, Girish Karnad, Badal Sircar and Vijay Tendulkar stand out for their bold and brilliant works.

In Tendulkar's *Sakharam Binder* the hero Sakharam is a rogue, a drunkard and a gambler. He brings home a new woman every now and then, keeps her for some time and when tired of her kicks her out. In Champa, a saucy tart, he meets his match. He gets jealous of a friend on whom this woman casts amorous glances. After a drunken bout he murders her in a fit of jealousy.

But the playwright does not damn the hero. In fact, Sakharam emerges as an honest man in a society of moralists and hypocrites. All the characters are social outcasts who reject the society which has rejected them.

Tendulkar's other important play is *Ghasiram Kotwal*, based on an episode in Maratha history. Ghasiram, a poor Brahmin, is humiliated and rejected by the Poona Brahmins, and he goes back to his village. He rears his daughter who grows into a beautiful girl, brings her to Poona and presents her to the all-powerful Nana Phadnavis. Nana appoints Ghasiram as the city kotwal who becomes a tyrant. In the end his daughter is killed as a result of palace intrigues and, he himself is stoned to death by the Poona Brahmins.

The Brahmins do not so much represent a caste in Tendulkar's play as a ruling class.



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The play employs songs, dances, stylized movement and rhythms based on the Tamasha folk form.

In the folk theatre experiments, Habib Tanvir works with a troupe of tribal actors and actresses of Madhya Pradesh. His company with its raw vitality and earthy quality, performs in villages and cities. His most popular play has been *Charndas Chor*, portraying the adventures of a clever thief who reverses social values and proves that right is wrong and wrong is right in our corrupt society.

In Bengal, Utpal Dutt, director of People's Little Theatre, is an extreme leftist. Almost all his productions deal with the current situation in Bengal. The authorities banned some of them and even put Utpal behind the bars at times. But his is a dynamic theatre with superb stagecraft, choreography and acting.

Shyamanand Jalan has created a little island of Hindi theatre in Calcutta. A founder-member of 'Anamika' which is run by the Marwari community as a forum to promote Hindi drama, he broke away from the parent organization due to its puritanical bias and founded his own group to experiment freely. Jalan made a crack in the traditional moral values of his big-business fraternity by his theatre activities.

There are other playwrights who are drawn to the folk theatre and borrow from it its stylised speech and action. In Maharashtra P. L. Deshpande and G. D. Madgulkar have given a new status to the much-disguised Tamasha; in Gujarat, Dina Pathak has reflected folk legends and rural life in her Bhavai operas.

In the Punjabi theatre, Sheila Bhatia's operas take their impulse from folk melodies. Her productions of *Heer Ranjha* (a love legend), *Rukhe Khet* (an account of famine and exploitation of the farm labourer), and *Chann Badlan Da* (a collage of rural songs, lullabies, ceremonials and dances) have been extremely popular with city audiences which are drawn to them not merely because of their nostalgia for the past but because of a genuine cultural identification.

Vijaya Mehta and Amal Allana are two of the outstanding avant-garde women directors.

Vijaya Mehta's production of *Shakuntala* and Brecht's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* in Marathi language in the Tamasha folk form have been brilliant expressions.

Amal Allana and her designer husband Nissar work as a team. Her productions include Punjabi version of *Desire Under the Elms*; the

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Hindi version of Brecht's *The Exception and The Rule*; and Lorca's *The House of Bernarda Alba*.

Amal possesses great emotional power and injects fire into the players. Her production of *Maha-Bohoj* on a wide open-air stage had multiple action, freezes, and presented characters in different situations, expressing the irony and contradiction of life in a stereoscopic view.

Among actresses, Sunekha Sikri and Utra Baoker of the National Repertory Company, New Delhi, have added to the vitality of contemporary theatre by their brilliant portrayal of complex roles in plays such as Osborn's Hindi version of *Look Back in Anger*, 7th century Sanskrit one-act *Mattavilasa*, Mohan Rekha's *Aadhe Adhuray*, Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq*, and Shanta Gandhi's folk opera *Meena Gurjari*.

Many centres for theatrical training have been established. Among the most important are the National School of Drama and the Asian Theatre Institute in New Delhi, Sangeet Natak Akademi (National Academy of Music, Dance, and Drama) in New Delhi, and the National Centre for the Performing Arts in Bombay.

India's genius still lies in its dance-dramas, which have a unique form based on centuries of unbroken tradition. There are very few professional theatre companies in the whole of India, but thousands of amateur productions are staged every year by organized groups. Out of this intense experimental activity, a contemporary national theatre has evolved, which has a distinct flavour of song, dance, colour, theme and mood of its people.

*Manohar Singh in the make-up transformation as Sultan Tughlaq in Girish Karnad's "Tughlaq", directed by E. Alkazi, New Delhi (1982)* ►

*The eccentric Sultan Tughlaq (Manohar Singh) killing his faithful friend who betrayed him in Girish Karnad's "Tughlaq", directed by E. Alkazi, New Delhi (1972)* ►





*Gandhari cursing Krishna in Dharamvir Bharati's verse play "Andha Yug" (The Blind Age) directed by E. Alkazi, National School of Drama, New Delhi (1964)*

*Queen Razia (Rohini Hattangadi, Kasturba in Attenborough's "Gandhi") and her scheming Step-mother in "Sultan Razia", written by Balwant Gargi, directed by E. Alkazi, National School of Drama, New Delhi (1973)*

*Stylized make-up and half masks as used by Alkazi* ►





*Sohrab comforting his beloved in Agha Hashr  
Kashmiri's (great Urdu Playwright)  
"Rustam-o-Sohrab" directed by Habib Tanvir,  
New Delhi (1961)*

*Trapped coal miners in "Angar" (Coal) written  
and produced by Utpal Dutt, Calcutta (1960)*





*The muslim peasant (Sombhu Mitra) and his  
starving wife (Tripti Mitra) in "Tulsi Lahir  
Chhenra Taar" (Broken String) produced by  
Bahuroopi and directed by Sombhu Mitra,  
Calcutta (1950)*





*Royal Palace scene of the Sanskrit play  
"Malavikagnimitram" where musicians sit  
on stage in view, directed by V. Raghvan  
for the Madras Music Society (1964)*





*Gambling scene; two rival cousins of the Kaurava and Pandava clans, in "Paanchali Sabatham". Seva Stage production, Madras (1959)*

*Antigone confronting Creon in Anouilh's  
"Antigone", directed by Balwant Gargi,  
Studio Theatre, Chandigarh (1974)*

*The Yakshagana folk opera actor tying his  
long stranded moustache (1964)*



**TEXT: Balwant Gargi**

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